

Women of the Bardo

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Museums are often better than books for giving us access to important evidence first hand. Here Inga Mantle introduces us to a collection in Tunisia and what it can tell us about ancient women.

The National Museum of the Bardo in Tunis is a large archaeological museum well known for its collection of splendid floor mosaics of the later Roman empire. Mostly now displayed on the walls for easier viewing, these show mythological scenes and all kinds of plants and animals. There are also scenes in the amphitheatre, and more fantastically by the banks of the Nile, while hunting, fishing and country pursuits are also popular, all of them portraying related aspects of male excellence (*uirtus*). If it is female status you're interested in, you'll be hard pressed to find material here. Better for gauging how the women of the Roman province of Africa Proconsularis and the eastern part of Numidia were seen and saw the world are the Museum's reliefs and statues.

Women and religion

It is well known that women were barred from holding magistracies in the Roman empire. However, a few held something comparable, a priesthood, just as men did. A fine conventional Roman statue of Minia Procula (right), wife of C. Sallustius Dexter, from Bulla Regia in Numidia, was set up by her son, C. Sallustius Praenestinus, in the late second century A.D. Procula is represented as an older woman, perhaps with portrait features, or possibly with the generic face of a person of greater age and experience. The inscription indicates that she was a *flaminica*, a priestess of the cult of an empress. This was the highest public office and honour a woman could aspire to in the provinces, and such a woman was usually upper class, often the wife of a *flamen* (priest of the imperial cult), and ideally a benefactor to her local community. Procula's inscription cements her position but omits any mention of benefactions.

A less well-born woman might be a *sacerdos*, a priestess, usually of the Cereres. Ceres and her daughter Proserpina were favourite goddesses in North Africa. These goddesses seem very relevant to women: not only were they

associated with the realms beneath the earth, but they were believed to promote human and agricultural fertility and growth. A beautiful relief sculpture of Calpennia Victoria shows her in a Carthaginian-styled dress, holding a small incense pot, while beside her is a basket of bread (or fruit?) entwined by a snake, and a slender blazing altar. Other women can be recognised as priestesses of the Cereres by the appearance of a torch (looking like a stack of interlocking cups) beside them.

Another example of a religious woman, although her precise role is not indicated, is on the mosaic lid of a late fourth-century or early fifth-century Christian sarcophagus from Thabraca in Numidia: here another Victoria, finely dressed and wearing a lovely shawl, holds out her hands in prayer, while above her sits a scribe, probably her husband. Her whole *raison d'être* seems to have been to embody Christian piety, but she may have held some position in her local church.

Women and death

Most women of course did not hold any public office, but they may still be known to us from their funerary monuments. A beautiful second-century statue of a young woman, Crepereia Innula (below), set up by her husband T. Arranius Commodus, suggests both that she was well born and that her husband came of a wealthy family – wealthy enough to have this statue sculpted in the best Roman style. No doubt it also made it clear that he had loved her and at the same time displayed the family's wealth, status, and good taste.

A somewhat humbler woman, Fausta, daughter of Barigbal, was commemorated at death on a stone relief, along with her two-year-old freed slave girl, sitting on a couch before our eyes beside a reclining man, no doubt her husband. A somewhat similar funerary relief with inscription was set up by P. Flavius Felix for his wife, Caelia Bonosa Mazica, a midwife (*obstetrix*). Mazica is an African personal name. She lived 42 years 3 months. Felix himself is commemorated on the same

stone.

Women and work

Often the women represented in works of art are nameless – though this does not make them mute. For example, the central register of a votive panel to the local Saturn, Ba'al, set up by a successful farmer named Cuttinus (a Punic name), shows him together with his wife and two daughters. The implication is that all of them were equally involved in the work of the farm. But even if they weren't, these women make a valuable contribution to its success as status-symbol.

This kind of approach gives us more traction on the floor mosaics as evidence and on the few nameless women who appear in otherwise male-dominated scenes. Perhaps the Museum's best-known mosaic, belonging to the fourth century, and found in a town house in Carthage, depicts the country estate of the *dominus* Julius. But it also depicts his wife, the mistress or 'domina', twice. In the centre of the first register she sits fanning herself while two women servants or tenants and two men bring her seasonal fruits; in the third, bottom register (below) she is standing in a Venus-like pose and wearing a different gown, while a well-dressed maidservant offers her a necklace from a jewellery casket. What are we to make of her inclusion? It is as though her leisure and beauty are indicative of the prosperity of the estate, her own prestige (and its prestige) underlined by the humble figures, three of them women, who attend her.

Another apparent *domina* appears on a mosaic from baths belonging to an estate at Sidi Ghrib near Tunis. She is sitting on a folding chair wearing fine clothing and jewellery, with accoutrements of the baths around her, and two maidservants are attending her, one of whom holds up a mirror while the other has a basket full of jewels. Although both the maids are wearing nice dresses, it is clear that they are only accessories.

Lastly, another mosaic, one of three from the same room of a villa in Thabraca, and dating to the late fourth century, shows a solitary woman seated on a hummock and spinning (below). She is surrounded by chickens (which have now disappeared), sheep (which you can still

see parts of) and trees, including olives and vines. She is very special to us because she is shown actually spinning with a distaff and spindle. She is finely dressed in the standard conventional style of the period, with broad stripes running down her tunic and on her sleeves, and with a snood over her hair: she seems most composed. Rather than dismissing her as 'a simple shepherdess' (as some scholars do), I see her as possibly the *domina* of her estate: like the ideal Roman wife she spins wool (she is a *lanifica*) but she is alone, with only a horse to keep her company on all three mosaics, the rest of the backdrop amounting to estate-buildings and produce. Is she a wealthy widow, or an esteemed estate-manager?

Less respectable perhaps are the two women in a fourth-century depiction of a banquet from Carthage, their clothes in disarray as they rattle long-handled castanets and dance to the music of a male panpipe-player, in order to entertain the guests. Or the girls on plaster bath-reliefs from the third-century Baths of the Cyclopes in Thugga, who are shown naked except for their pants. Are these bathers, more entertainers (dancers or pantomime artistes), prostitutes, or athletes? Without inscriptions, it is impossible to be certain.

Women and history

This has merely scratched the surface of the ways in which the women of provinces of North Africa are still visible. While some of them, like the priestesses of the Cereres or Cuttinus' family invoking Ba'al-Saturn, seem peculiarly African, others have their counterparts elsewhere in the Roman empire. None of them have left us their diaries or letters. Only a few have left us their names. But they endure in the Bardo. Its sculpture and mosaics help us to make them and their world live again.

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